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# Women in Transition: A Qualitative Analysis of Definitions of Poverty and Success

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## Women in Transition: A Qualitative Analysis of Definitions of Poverty and Success

### Abstract

A phenomenological approach examined the stories of ten women transitioning from childhood poverty to adult life. Women were chosen from a pool of participants in an Upward Bound program designed to assist low-income and/or first-generation college students in the Midwestern United States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to retrospectively explore their lived experiences. Recurring themes included facilitators of change, specifically the people, including mental health professionals, family members, romantic partners, and friends who helped make change possible. Another frequent theme found in the research was the impact an education had on the participants. Finally, the participants shared their own insights related to the stigma of poverty and their diverse experiences in transitioning away from poverty. Research findings could prove beneficial to social service professionals interested in understanding the complex realities of resilient, impoverished women.

### Keywords

Phenomenology, Poverty, Women, Motherhood

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## **Women in Transition: A Qualitative Analysis of Definitions of Poverty and Success**

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*A phenomenological approach examined the stories of ten women transitioning from childhood poverty to adult life. Women were chosen from a pool of participants in an Upward Bound program designed to assist low-income and/or first-generation college students in the Midwestern United States. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to retrospectively explore their lived experiences. Recurring themes included facilitators of change, specifically the people, including mental health professionals, family members, romantic partners, and friends who helped make change possible. Another frequent theme found in the research was the impact an education had on the participants. Finally, the participants shared their own insights related to the stigma of poverty and their diverse experiences in transitioning away from poverty. Research findings could prove beneficial to social service professionals interested in understanding the complex realities of resilient, impoverished women.*

*Keywords: Phenomenology, Poverty, Women, Motherhood*

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Although the United States is perceived as an economic world leader, poverty adversely impacts a significant proportion of its citizens. For instance, research cited by the Economic Mobility Project (EMP, 2010) indicated that more than 50% of U. S. citizens have an income at the bottom one-fifth of the population. Furthermore, individuals in the lower strata tend to remain in that position for a decade or more. The adverse economic impact of poverty is frequently compounded by society's preconceived notions about individuals living in poverty. Society tends to ascribe pathology to those earning the lowest incomes and to attribute income levels to personal deficiencies (Popple & Leighninger, 2008). McCombs (2009) noted that individuals commonly misperceive those in poverty as ignorant, stupid, lazy, and incapable of bettering themselves.

Women, especially women of color, who receive public assistance of any kind frequently endure heightened scrutiny (Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2003, as cited in Lott & Bullock, 2010). Gender differences occur across all income levels. According to the Center for American Progress (CAP, 2007), 13.8% of women in the U. S. were poor as compared to 11.1% of men. Women of color, single mothers, and older women experience poverty at higher rates and remain in poverty for longer periods in comparison to other groups (Cawthorne, 2008). Women living in poverty face a double bind—coping with the adverse economic impact of poverty and contending with social stigma. In spite of the stigma, some women utilize available educational resources such as the Educational Talent Search program. It is important to identify the protective factors that help women effectively utilize available social support systems, as they can aid clinicians who work with those moving from poverty. This qualitative study seeks to extend the

existing literature by sharing the stories of ten women who self-identified as being impoverished in childhood, participating in an Educational Talent Search Program in the Midwestern portion of the United States during their early adulthood, and creating their own transitions into adulthood.

### **Literature Review**

The experience of poverty can be one that is fraught with ambiguity. Much of the mystery surrounding poverty lies in the fact that the term is difficult to operationally define. In addition to the challenge of finding a concise definition, there are as many proposed reasons for why poverty exists as there are researchers to suggest them. Clearly, poverty is not a concept that can be neatly defined or easily explained. However, the majority of individuals view poverty as a stigmatizing and shaming experience that no one wants to admit having firsthand knowledge of, but one that everyone wants to escape.

Bullock and Limbert (2003) cited the importance of obtaining an education, particularly as a way to enhance one's socioeconomic status. However, four-year degree programs are often inaccessible to many low-income women, especially welfare recipients. Although college boosts a woman's social standing as well as her psychological well-being, low-income women often expressed uncertainty about beginning and finishing a baccalaureate degree program (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). There is not an extensive amount of literature that speaks to the idea that low-income women view education, especially training programs, as a way to achieve upward mobility (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). However, the participants in this study had participated in the Educational Talent Search program at one point. Although their experiences with the program varied, each of the women understood the importance of obtaining an education.

Many people, particularly individuals in American society, believe that anyone can achieve the American dream, because this is the land of opportunity. As a result, many encourage others to pull themselves up by their bootstraps to become successful (whatever success is). However, many not only cannot find their bootstraps, but they also have no idea what a bootstrap is. Truly, leaving one lifestyle behind for another is much more challenging than previously thought, for there is much to consider along the road to prosperity. Furthermore and perhaps most importantly, changes in social class are a psychological adjustment. It is a transitional process for one to grow up in childhood poverty and then make the intentional decision during adulthood that will alter her social status. The choices associated with altering one's social class are neither straight-forward nor easy.

### **Impoverished Women**

Distinct gender differences can be found throughout poverty statistics. According to the Center for American Progress (CAP) in 2007, 13.8% of women in the United States were poor compared to 11.1% of men (Cawthorne, 2008). Research cited by the Economic Mobility Project (2010) predicted that more than 50% of U. S. citizens have an income at the bottom one-fifth of the population and they will continue to remain in that position a decade later. Although most individuals temporarily live in impoverished

conditions, women of color, single mothers, and older women experience poverty at higher rates in comparison to other groups, and they often remain there for a longer period of time (Cawthorne, 2008). Moreover, in comparison to men, women are less likely to move out of bottom income levels (Economic Mobility Project, 2010).

Society often has preconceived notions about poverty, namely that it is pathological within the individual. With that, poverty is associated with individual role deficiencies rather than the failure of social institutions to support a person's role performance (Poppo & Leighninger, 2008). Women in particular are often viewed by society as a problem of one kind or another (Belle, 1994). For example, our language centers on such issues as the welfare problem, the teenage pregnancy problem, or problems with poor women who suffer with depression. Unfortunately, many do not see the individual woman who struggles. Consequently, when an impoverished woman asks for assistance, we commonly offer her strategies that are more suited for middle-class women or men. When these techniques fail, the women are often blamed for lack of comprehension or intelligence (Belle, 1994).

The United States is associated with the concept of the American Dream whereby anyone can become *successful* if she works hard. Furthermore, because the majority culture is solution-focused, we believe that given the appropriate answers or resources, anyone can overcome the obstacles to her dreams. As such, the majority culture equates success with education level, financial status, economic security, and prosperity, making the assumption that success is an all-or-none concept. On the other hand, women who receive public assistance of any kind, especially women of color, are publicly scrutinized (Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2003, as cited in Lott & Bullock, 2010). McCombs (2009) commented that people commonly misperceive the poor as ignorant, stupid, or lazy because they have been unable to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps. She asked that people attempt to understand the challenges personally faced as the result of gender, race, and neighborhood of residence, instead of pity her for her socioeconomic status.

Many individuals are surprised to learn that the largest group of impoverished persons in the United States is the working poor (Lott & Bullock, 2001). This finding conflicts with the stereotypical view that equates poverty to being unemployed and/or on welfare. A speech given by Jesse Jackson (cited in Lott, 2002) at The American Psychological Association's (APA) Annual Convention in 1999 provides an excellent example:

Most poor people work every day. Most poor people in the U. S. are not Black, not Brown. Most poor people are White, female, young, invisible, and without national leaders. Most poor people are not on welfare. They raise other people's children. . . They put food in our children's schools. . . They clean our offices. . . They cut grass. . . They pick lettuce. . . They work in hospitals, as orderlies . . . no job is beneath them. (p. 329)

Individuals who live in impoverished environments face unique challenges and subsequently, day-to-day life is a struggle. Kozol (1995) argued that individual stories of success could be damaging because tales that romanticize escaping a life of poverty are not based in reality. He noted it was rare for individuals to leave impoverished lifestyles

behind in a picturesque manner, particularly because the experience of leaving poverty behind is complex.

### **Routes Out of Poverty**

Researchers within the social psychology literature posit that when individuals are faced with crisis, injustice, or trauma, the most positive coping strategy is to take control of the situation. However, it is important to note that the “prevailing-through-coping ideologies” are frequently limited by class, race, and gender biases and are relevant for only a small privileged portion of society (Fine, 1983-84, p. 250). The accepted belief of the theory behind taking-control has been that individuals *do* have control over the forces that oppress them and that they *should* take advantage of the social supports that are available because they *will* benefit. Unfortunately, these methods of coping are not an option for everyone, especially those with little to no social power (Fine, 1983-84). Instead, individuals who are ethnically diverse, poor, or female take a different approach to control. For example, for women, taking control may include ignoring advice, recognizing that one cannot rely upon her social networks, and realizing that taking control can only be accomplished through collective, structural change (Fine, 1983-84). With that, “establishing strategies to survive, when change is unlikely, needs to be recognized as acts of control” (Fine, 1983-84, p. 252).

### **Ethnicity**

In a study of upwardly mobile Caucasian and Mexican-American teenage girls, Bettie (2002) found that the Mexican-American girls vehemently denied that mobility was connected to *Whiteness*. Specifically, the girls were “not apologetic about their mobility and did not feel any less Mexican for being college bound” (Bettie, 2002, p. 417). Because the young girls were actively involved in extracurricular activities that were linked to the Mexican-American community, they were given the opportunity to obtain college skills while simultaneously maintaining their racial and ethnic identity. It is not uncommon for many to associate being middle-class with being White; therefore, the upwardly mobile ethnic minority may find him or herself in a precarious position of negotiating ethnic heritage while at times striving to be significantly removed from their history (Bettie, 2002). However, for many ethnic minorities, race and social class seem to go hand in hand.

Moving toward unfamiliarity is challenging, particularly in reference to a shift in social class identity. Bettie (2002) discovered that for upwardly mobile teenage girls, negotiating the balance of being connected to, yet separate from, their parents was difficult. Specifically, the girls agreed that social mobility was important; however, they denied purposely insulting their parents by suggesting they wanted to rise above their families of origin. Moreover, the girls discovered that they felt not only confused, but also ambivalent when they realized their desire for mobility could have lasting impressions on their relationships with their parents (Bettie, 2002). Parents faced a similar struggle in that while they not only supported an encouraged opportunities for their children, they also feared the social distance that could be created by these same opportunities.

## Education

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, researchers began reporting that for women, the most reliable route out of poverty was the attainment of a college degree (Rose, 2000; Acker et al., 2002). Furthermore, Adair (2001) commented the “widening chasm between the economically stable and the poor is a gap most often predicated on the distinction between those who have an education and those who do not” (p. 222). Having access to an education cannot only change one’s economic status, but also assist in the ability to engage in higher-order thinking, become a better parent and citizen, a source for personal pride, and perhaps most importantly, becoming a role-model for children (Adair 2001; Dill, 1998; Vides & Steinitz, 1996). Furthermore, Holyfield (2002) commented that although the attainment of an education is correlated with increased income potential, it is also associated with a sense of increased personal power, control, empowerment, and cultural savvy.

According to Bullock and Limbert (2003), aside from marriage, education is one of the most common ways to achieve upward mobility. Bettie (2002) discovered that beginning as early as high school, teenage girls recognized the importance of higher education, particularly if an older sister had attended college. Older sisters seemed to play a crucial role by providing important information about the college experience (Bettie, 2002). However, Higginbotham and Weber (1992) found that although, families stressed the importance of obtaining an education, it was often viewed and desired differently. For example, in comparison to women who were reared in middle-class families, those who were defined as upwardly mobile received less emotional and financial support from their families.

In addition, for individuals who are impoverished, the value of an education often does not translate into operational goals. Specifically, the individual may not have access to educational resources, or the resources that are available are difficult to obtain (Holleb, 1972; Lichter & Crowley, 2002). Finally, Gans (1995) commented that even though education is regarded as one of the most reliable routes out of poverty, the education made available is sometimes second-tier; in other words, for those of lower socioeconomic status to be able to take advantage of an education, the opportunities provided must include access to the best schools and teachers.

**Educational Talent Search.** The Educational Talent Search program is one of eight federally funded programs provided by TRIO services. The TRIO programs are designed to provide outreach and student services to individuals who have been identified as disadvantaged; namely, individuals who are low-income, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The Educational Talent Search was specifically created to help individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been identified as having the potential to progress successfully through higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The program targets not only high school students who want to pursue higher education, but also encourages individuals who may not have completed high school or advanced training to re-enroll and complete their degrees. The primary goal of Educational Talent Search is to improve the number disadvantaged youth who graduate from high school and subsequently obtain an advanced degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

## **Research Method**

This study implemented a qualitative research methodology. According to Morrow and Smith (2000), qualitative research is defined by either an emphasis on particular characteristics being studied, or more broadly by the overall themes of participants' experiences. Qualitative designs involve a worldview that acknowledges how each individual assigns meaning to events and behavior (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999). A strength of qualitative research is that it allows for a set of flexible and sensitive methods for discovering components of social life that were not previously well understood (McLeod, 2001). Qualitative research is especially pertinent when the purpose of the study is to understand the intricacy of people's lives, i.e., specifically examining each individual perspective in context (Heppner et al., 1999). The power of qualitative research lies not only in the presentation of the participants' lived experiences, but also in the analysis of the researcher (Morrow & Smith, 2000).

## **Research Design**

The data were derived from ten women who had previously participated in an Educational Talent Search program in the Midwestern portion of the United States. This research was designed to explore their lives and experiences, specifically as a result of participating in this federally sponsored program. An initial question guiding the research was whether the women, who identified as having impoverished childhoods, would have raised their social-class standing as adults, primarily as the result of participating in a program that was geared toward assisting them in obtaining more education. The women's common experiences were identified, most notably that at the time this study was conducted, they continued to be in a state of transition. Furthermore, the data indicated that although the women recognized the importance of an education, the changes that they continued to make seemed to be more of a result of having children and ensuring their children's quality of life was better than their own. Perhaps most importantly, the data indicated that the women had to be "ready" for change because for many, this task was more of an obstacle and a challenge than ones they had previously known.

## **Participants**

The participants were purposely sought (Polkinghorne, 2005), using criterion sampling, as participants met a pre-determined set of criteria in order to participate (Morrow, 2005; Morrow & Smith, 2000). To the extent possible, I purposely attempted to obtain a sample of participants who varied according to both age and ethnicity. Following approval to conduct this study, I consulted with a staff member of the Educational Talent Search (ETS), which is a division of the Upward Bound program. The ETS was specifically targeted because this division is associated with successful women who have overcome adverse conditions.

After being provided with two separate lists with a combined total of approximately one hundred women's names, I wrote each potential participant a letter, stating she had been nominated to participate in a research study where she would have



the opportunity to discuss her transitional life experiences. Included in the letter was a statement regarding an incentive of a \$20 Wal-Mart gift card that would be mailed to them upon completion of a one- to two-hour confidential, audio-taped interview. After sending the initial letter, I contacted the first ten women via telephone. Each potential research participant was then formally asked to participate in this study. I asked agreeable participants to schedule a convenient date and time for a face-to-face interview to be conducted in the participant's home. If the potential participant declined to be interviewed in her home, I asked to conduct the interview in my office. Each woman was informed she could withdraw her participation from the study at any time without penalty. Although I was finally able to recruit ten participants, it was necessary to utilize all one hundred names to do so.

During the time that this research project was being conducted, the participants lived in the Midwestern portion of the United States in close proximity to a mid-sized university which housed the ETS segment of the Upward Bound program. All ten of the women who participated in this study met specific income requirements and/or were first-generation college students. Because I believed my results would be based upon the experiences of women who had overcome poverty by obtaining an education, I was deliberate in my selection of participants. Each of the women had ended their association with the program at various times, which contributed to differences in their experiences.

Of the ten participants, eight of the women self-identified as European-American (White), one as African-American, and one as Caucasian/Italian. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 43 with a mean age of 28.5 years. Educational level ranged from less than eighth grade to an Associate's Degree. Of the nine participants who responded to the question regarding yearly income, seven reported incomes below \$20,000. Five identified themselves as single, one as separated, two divorced, and two married. All ten women reported having at least one child (see table one for a summary of participant characteristics).

*Table 1. Summary of the Participants Characteristics*

Participant	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Marital Status	Kids	Education	Yearly Income
Jody	22	European American	Single	1	GED	NA
Christy	28	European American	Single	2	Vocational School	Below \$20,000/year
Debra	41	European American	Divorced	2	Vocational School	Below \$20,000/year
Brenda	22	European American	Divorced	1	Vocational School	Below \$20,000/year
Vicky	27	European American	Married	3	GED	\$21,000- 40,000/year
Codie	18	Other Caucasian/	Single	1	GED	Below \$20,000/year

Pam	34	Italian European American	Married	2	Less than 8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	\$21,000- 40,000/year
Tawana	27	African American	Single	1	High School Graduate	Below \$20,000/year
Jeannie	43	European American	Separated	1	Some High School	Below \$20,000/year
Kim	23	European American	Single	2	Associates Degree	Below \$20,000/year

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## **Procedure**

The women provided consent to participate in this research project and agreement to audio-taping were secured. The participants completed a demographic questionnaire prior to their respective interviews of approximately one to two hours. The first participant's interview began with a prepared list of questions. However, after only a few moments into the interview, I began to stray from my structured questions and the interaction was more similar to a free-flowing conversation. At the end of the first interview, the woman asked "why I wanted to know her story," prompting the use of a broader question for the remaining interviews. Participants two through ten were asked to "just tell their story."

I asked follow-up questions, which prompted discussions regarding a desire for change, who and what factors contributed to the change, and how the change impacted their lives. Discussion ensued around the stigma of poverty and fear of regressing to their original situations/status. Each woman was assigned a pseudonym to protect her confidentiality.

I transcribed each of the audio-taped interviews and then mailed a hard copy to the respective participant along with the \$20 gift card. The women were asked to review the transcript in order to ensure her statements had been accurately captured. They were encouraged to make comments, suggestions, and provide feedback regarding their responses. None of the women indicated any inaccuracies in their responses; therefore, no corrections were made to the original transcripts. To ensure data credibility, I engaged in memo writing and journaling, allowing for reflection throughout the entire project.

## **Researcher Credibility**

At the time this study was conducted, I was a 29-year old Counseling Psychology doctoral student from a medium-sized Midwestern state university. I was reared by a blue-collar family in a small Texas town. I began this project with many assumptions about success and academic achievement, primarily because my experiences have allowed these two variables to be one and the same. One of the most important lessons I learned was that even though I equate success with academia, the women in this study did not.

My research interests in areas related to the underserved, success, and women's issues developed as a result of my own life experiences. In regard to my chosen career

path, I have always been aware that I was an outlier in comparison not only to former classmates, but also to family members. I have always been intrigued as to how I made the decisions I did. Luckily, family members and professors listened and believed in me as they guided me in my path toward educational success. I believed that in order to build rapport with my participants, it was vitally important that I shared much of this information as I introduced myself to the women. My hope was that by being open and honest, it would allow the women to know their stories were salient and my goal was to learn as much as possible from their experiences.

In addition to personal experience with change in social class, my education and training to become a Counseling Psychologist assisted in the preparation of conducting original research. I completed research methods and statistics courses at both the master's and doctoral level. Dr. Sybil Schroeder, the second author, adds researcher credibility to this study as well. She matriculated in formal graduate level classes in preparation for research and interviewing. Those classes included five research classes: two in the master's program and three in the doctoral program in addition to Advanced Counseling Theory and Techniques that served as a foundation for the skills required to conduct semi-structured interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

Morrow and Smith (2000) described data analysis in the realm of qualitative research as the process of "discovering or constructing meaning from data" (p. 213). Transcribed interviews were analyzed with the purpose of seeking and identifying overarching response themes given by the research participants. Therefore, this research study implemented a model based on grounded theory as its "ultimate aim was to produce innovative theory that was grounded in data collected from participants on the basis of complexities of their lived experiences in a social context" (Fassinger, 2005, p. 157). The grounded theory approach is considered reflexive because the researcher makes his or her views, ideas, and influences known through the process of memo writing and auditing (i.e., documenting emerging theoretical ideas and monitoring analytic decisions) (Fassinger, 2005). This approach is regarded as one of the most applicable forms of data analysis for counseling psychologists who are interested in diversity and social justice issues, as it allows the researcher to address some of society's most distressing problems (Fassinger, 2005).

Because the analysis proceeded throughout the process of data collection, the constant comparative method (CCM) was utilized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Fassinger, 2005). As each response was obtained, it was compared and contrasted with others. The purpose of this method was to promote the continuous polishing of the categories that were created through the process of data analysis (McLeod, 2001). The overarching goal was to interpret or construct meaning from the narratives of the participants (Fassinger, 2005).

**Open and axial coding.** In using the constant comparative method for data analysis, open and axial coding was used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Open coding, which is often regarded as the first step in forming a theory from the data, involved transforming responses into concepts and analyzing these concepts for additional meanings or

interpretations (Fassinger, 2005). Each portion of the coded data was compared to other coded data with the purpose of creating categories to include these newly formed concepts. Once general categories were determined for each piece of data, they were then used to establish abstract or more general codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Fassinger, 2005).

Whereas open coding generally occurs first in the process of data analysis, axial coding is typically the second level of coding. Axial coding involved examining relationships among categories and grouping them into larger key categories, essentially “putting the fractured data back together in the form of categories and their interrelationships” in order to complete the next step in generating a theory (Fassinger, 2005, p. 160). This process was similar to examining individual pieces of a jigsaw puzzle before putting them back together to form a complete picture (McLeod, 2001). Axial coding was a crucial step in my data analysis, as it assisted me in determining not only the meaning of individual categories, but also the overall relationship among categories for the women (Fassinger, 2005).

I anticipated categories would follow the self-efficacy model. For example, women would provide specific responses that were related to beliefs about the power for change and the presence and or observation of a role model. As the women shared stories about their process of change, two overarching themes developed, especially as they spoke about the motivating factors behind their decisions to change. All of the participants were mothers and they all explained that learning they were pregnant or having children was the overwhelming reason they wanted their lives to be different (i.e., so they could provide a better life for their children). In addition, the women noted that series of events such as experiencing significant periods of abuse or struggling with the effects of drug addiction led them to make changes in their lives, particularly when they “hit rock bottom.” Finally, in regard to having successful role models from which to shape their own lives, it was much more common for the women to identify people in their lives whom they wanted to be drastically different from (i.e., friends and family members). In other words, they had made conscious decisions to change in order to *not* have similar lives as compared to anyone in their social support system.

## **Results**

My initial goal when I began this research project was to learn about the women’s lived experiences in being able to call themselves successful. I anticipated their stories would vary somewhat; yet, I also expected that identifying as a “successful woman” or a woman who had “successfully overcome a life of poverty” was the crux of this study. However, after only one interview, I realized that my study was about something much more powerful - the process of change and or a shift in identity. For many of the women I spoke with, making one decision made a significant difference in the direction their lives would take.

### **The Inception of Change**

The ten study participants were mothers who, at the time they learned of their unplanned pregnancies, were unprepared for the responsibilities associated with

parenthood (i.e., due to age, financial limitations, etc.). Eight of the women verbalized that having an abortion or giving the baby up for adoption were never considered options. More than five of the ten women stated having children or learning they were pregnant became the single most motivating factor in promoting life-altering changes. The results of my study were similar to those found by Edin and Kefalas (2005) in a study of poor women who described placing a high priority on motherhood. Specifically, the women in their study explained that motherhood “saved” them (p. 11) and marked “the point at which their life had just begun” (p. 70). As such, the women in my study viewed motherhood as the determining reason why they began to consider making different life choices – the decision to become clean and sober, pursue an education, and/or leave an abusive relationship.

The birth of the baby was significant in fostering change, with sufficient impact to motivate the women toward educational attainment. When exploring reasons for pursuing an education, the women equated it to being able to provide for their children. For example, Pam, a married mother of two girls reported dropping out of high school in the tenth grade. At the time of this study, she had not achieved her General Equivalency Degree (GED), but explained that her children were the only reason she “wanted changes made.” All the women spoke of their desire to create a stable environment and provide material possessions for their children. Brenda, a 22-year-old divorced mother of a two-year-old son, was attending a local community college part-time when this study was conducted. She had hopes of entering the nursing profession, commenting:

*I'll do that [attend school] so that my son has good things. And you know, if I didn't have my son, I'd probably be living with my parents, not having a job, cause it wouldn't matter to me anyway, but a kid changes that.*

### **Facilitators of Change**

When asked about variables that allowed for the change process to occur more easily, five of the women named specific structured programs that provided support and encouragement, while fostering a sense of hope, self-esteem, and independence. Particularly for individuals who were either working to obtain a GED or a college education, the Literacy Education and Advancement Project (LEAP), a government sponsored program, provided childcare and transportation, contributing to the psychological well-being of three study participants. Jody, who was the mother of a nine-month-old son, had recently obtained her GED, and was planning to begin taking classes at a local community college at the time of this interview. Her description follows:

*Like, for GED, they help us out with diapers and stuff. And, well, basically, that. And plus, when my son was born, it was just hectic and it drove me mental. So, coming here gave me a break, just like for six hours a day, which was like so great. And, that got me motivated to come every day 'cause I could study.*

Many women acknowledged that without the assistance, support, and encouragement from particular programs and people, change would have been impossible.

## Mental Health Professionals

Three of the women spoke about assistance they obtained from professionals within the mental health field. For example, Christy explained that on the day she decided to leave her partner and become clean and sober, she visited her psychiatrist. She stated he had been able to “get through” to her even though members of her family had been trying to provide her with the same message for a number of years.

Debra noted the mental health assistance she received following her divorce helped in many ways. She explained her case manager was instrumental in her application for Social Security Disability. Participating in a weekly Women’s Support Group and individual counseling had a positive impact and she explained the services helped her to realize “if you don’t feel good about yourself, you ain’t gonna be able to do nothing.” Family counseling was mentioned by Codie as being helpful, especially after discovering she was pregnant while she was heavily using methamphetamines; she was concerned the impact of her lifestyle would cause her baby to have developmental delays and was somewhat mitigated through the provision of emotional support by the family counselor.

## Family

Edin and Kefalas (2005) determined that poor mothers were more likely to rely on their own mothers and grandmothers for housing stability, financial assistance, advice, and constant encouragement. Of relevance to the current study, five of the ten women spoke about their mothers and the impact they had in their lives. Whether the assistance came in the form of tangible financial resources or encouragement, five of the women stated they valued the gifts their mothers provided.

Debra explained that while married, she experienced extreme physical and emotional abuse from her husband. She noted when she made the decision to leave the relationship she asked her grandmother if she could come “home,” explaining her grandmother ensured she always had a home. She noted that the most significant gift her grandmother provided was an understanding of the value of an education as evidenced by providing her with the “space” to accomplish her goals.

*My grandmother, she went and made a desk because I was always taking up the kitchen table with my school work and stuff. And she said, enough, you’re going to have a desk in the living room so we can eat at the dining room table.*

Christy, who was the mother of a five-year-old boy, referred to him as her “pride and joy.” She noted her mother had been helpful financially, especially for her son. Her mother and stepfather paid for her son’s day-care, his school clothes, and the “extras” he needed. She commented, “Like, I can do most of it, but there’s just some things I just can’t do and she helps out a lot there.”

Debra, who was the divorced mother of two teenage sons, was reared by her mother and grandmother. She shared the following consistent message from them: “They’d never tell me I shouldn’t do it. If you think you can do it, go for it!”

For many women, the frequency of contact with their extended family members contributed to the amount of support and encouragement they felt. It was not uncommon for the participants to describe their families in terms of the manner in which everyone rallied together to “pitch in and help one another with whatever.” For example, Jeannie, who was separated from her husband and the mother of a teenage son spoke about how “alone” she felt before a cousin and his girlfriend moved nearby. Because she was new to the area, her social support system was limited and she acknowledged feeling somewhat isolated. She explained that the decision for everyone to move in together seemed to be the most sensible solution to their situations. She described her cousin and his girlfriend as “a godsend” and stated because they were all taking care of one another, she was able to provide “extras” for her son.

### **Romantic Partner**

Ample research which speaks to the benefits of social support is available. For example, according to the stress buffering hypotheses, there is a relationship between stress level and perceived social support. If one is experiencing a significant amount of stress, social support can serve as a barrier, especially when one feels emotionally supported (Helgeson, 2003). Three of the women spoke about the amount of support they received from their current partners. Christy noted she and her partner were best friends and he had always been a significant part of her life. Vicky, who was the mother of three children, described experiencing on-going physical, emotional, and psychological abuse from her ex-husband. She spoke about the personal difficulty she sometimes experienced as a result of becoming remarried, explaining that because she had never received support or encouragement from her first husband, she had a difficult time hearing her second husband’s positive messages. She admitted she was unaware men could be “different, cause all the ones I’ve seen have all been the same.” She described the difference as being “scary and uncomfortable,” admitting that with her second marriage, and sometimes her life, seemed “too good to be true” and she sometimes “waits for one day for it to just totally change.”

Although Vicky provided many positive aspects about her current partner, she acknowledged losing some independence after she remarried. Specifically, she stated, “I used to make my own decisions; I was free to come and go as I wanted and there was nobody to bother talking about it.” Jody, whose partner was in prison at the time of our interview explained that the mere presence of her son’s father created an environment that interfered with her continued movement forward. She referred to him as an “alcoholic” and shared that the stress began when, “my baby’s dad wanted me to have an abortion.” At the time of her interview, Jody acknowledged she was uncertain about the status of their relationship because her partner had recently begun to tell his mother that their baby “wasn’t his.” Although she acknowledged her partner’s absence was a “good thing,” she also admitted she wanted him to be in her life, but recognized it had to be his decision. Finally, she ended the discussion about her partner by saying, “I don’t really care what he does as long as he’s a part of [my son’s] life somewhat. And some child support would be nice.”

## Friends

The presence of friends played a somewhat different role in facilitating positive change in the women's lives. In some instances, the women noted that their friends provided assistance during their life-altering change. However, the participants' new goals were in opposition to the complacent attitudes and viewpoints of several women in their respective friendship networks. The friends served as grim reminders of the lives left behind. For one woman, having a friend made the transition easier. Codie, the mother of a newborn baby girl, acknowledged her struggle in not having a stable living environment throughout her life. She admitted her friend had provided her with "somewhere to go" when she needed it the most. The participant explained that compared to her life, her friend's life was "normal" in that she had "never done drugs," and "was home all the time" as a result of her status as a full-time student.

## The Pursuit of an Education

Higher education enhances a woman's social standing and psychological well-being; however, low-income women often express uncertainty about beginning and finishing a baccalaureate degree program (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). All ten women in this study were mothers and the one unifying trait they shared was the desire to make their children's lives "better" than their own. Several women spoke about how much they disliked school, yet viewed education as being the "only way" to adequately provide for their families. For example, Kim, who is the mother of a three-year-old daughter and a five-year-old son spoke about the importance of an education, commenting, "You can't raise a kid on a cheeseburger salary." She was a full-time student, who also worked on an "as needed" basis as a grant writer.

Two of the women who participated in this study stated they preferred the idea of attending a smaller, community college (versus a state university) because the university was "too big" and had too many students.

## The Stigma of Poverty

Two women expressed their fear of "going backward" in regard to financial status. Jeannie discussed her apprehension at having to apply for government assistance in order to support her son after her marriage ended. She reported, "I did something I said I'd never do." She talked at length about her fear in reliving her childhood financial status. Tawana, the mother of a seven-year-old girl and who was three months pregnant at the time of our interview, stated she worked in the health care field and was attending classes to further her nursing career. She explained that because her hours had been "cut" and she was having problems with her partner, she felt she had "gone backward" in regard to her success. She shared the following:

*I think I was [successful]. I think. . . right now, I don't feel I am because. . . I mean, I don't know. I did - once upon a time. I thought then. . . everything was going good; my family was all right and. . . But now, it's like. . . I think it's just the job thing -that's why I feel this way. But other*



*than that, I keep my bills paid, no matter what, they get paid first. I don't have a car note, so that's a good thing.*

In addition to Tawana's feelings of "going backwards," one woman shared she did not feel successful at all. Pam, who commented that she thought "everybody's success is different," did not hesitate in saying she identified as unsuccessful. It seemed that not having her GED, a college degree, and being unemployed was such a powerful force in her life that in some ways, she could not see beyond what she had not been able to accomplish. For example, she explained:

*No, 'cause I don't [feel successful]. . . you know. I live in a one-bedroom house and it's just. . . I just look around and I'm like, okay. Not everybody's successful in their own way, but to me, it just. . . I'm happy with my life, but I didn't see myself. . . I didn't vision myself living in a one-bedroom house or anything like that. I always thought I'd work 'cause I dreamed. . . yeah, it'd be cool to go out and have a job and go out to eat on your lunch hour with your friends from work or something like that. You know, working in either an office or you know, whatever you would do. Whatever job you were doing at the time. But, yeah, I don't do that. I stay home with my kids, which is good. I wouldn't change that either.*

Throughout the interview, Pam mentioned more than once that although she did not "vision" her life the way it had turned out, she was happy. Additionally, when I asked Pam if she thought her husband, friends, or daughters regarded her as successful, she replied, "I honestly do not know." Similar to Tawana, Pam's interview was equally touching in that it was a reminder of the opportunities many of us take for granted.

## **Discussion**

A phenomenological study was conducted regarding the lived experiences of ten women who had participated in the Educational Talent Search Program. Participants for this qualitative study were ten women who had taken part in a federally sponsored program that assists low-income and/or first generation college students in pursuing their education. At the time this study was conducted, all of the women lived in the Midwestern portion of the United States in close proximity to the medium-sized university with which they were associated.

This research was closely aligned with the postmodern paradigm in that it focused on participants' lived experiences within a particular cultural context. The postmodern approach focuses on issues of power and power imbalances caused by oppressive societal forces (Morrow & Smith, 2000).

Because the postmodern paradigm utilized in this study is reflective of an ideological (i.e., critical) perspective, the ideological approach recognizes that each individual will interpret an event based on his or her understanding of the occurrence (i.e., constructivist) (Ponterotto, 2005). However, the ideological researcher posits that for some, the social reality that exists is oppressive and harmful, as individuals are influenced by the social, political, cultural, and economic forces in the environment,

especially forces asserted by those in positions of power (Heppner et al., 1999; Morrow & Smith, 2000).

### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

One of the most appropriate theoretical explanations guiding my inquiry was Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, particularly in regard to the component of motivation. Bandura posited that self-motivation was comprised of basic principles by which to evaluate performance. Individuals will strive to reach a desired goal until performance corresponds to a set of standards. When actual performance and performance standards are incongruent, the individual becomes dissatisfied, which serves as a motivator to make corrective changes in behavior. Therefore, the anticipation of attaining a desired goal as well as fear of not fulfilling the goal is the motivating force for action (Bandura, 1977).

Although motivation is a key component in the theory of self-efficacy, the crucial variable is the efficacy variable. Bandura (1977) proposed that before individuals could achieve a goal, they must first believe they could accomplish the desired task. The degree to which people believe in their abilities is correlated with the amount of energy that they will expend in an activity. These expectations predict how long an individual will pursue a task in lieu of obstacles and adverse experiences (Bandura, 1977).

An additional important component of the self-efficacy theory which is relevant to my study is the importance of vicarious experiences. Bandura (1977) discovered that when individuals witnessed others engage in activities without experiencing negative consequences, they became convinced they could behave in a similar manner (or achieve similar tasks) if they were persistent. The observers believed that if others could accomplish a goal, they should be able to as well (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura's (1977) thoughts about motivation and self-efficacy were significant to this study for a number of reasons. First of all, the issue of motivation is critical. I believed that in order for women to have successfully overcome their previous lives of poverty, they first had to have the courage, will, determination, and motivation to make changes. No matter the reason behind their motivation, I believe they began to desire a life that was different or better, as the life they presently had was no longer rewarding. However, having the motivation was not sufficient, for I assume these women also had to have the self-efficacy or the belief that life could be different and that they could make changes happen. I believe that in some cases this belief may have been stronger (depending on the circumstance), as some had the stamina to persevere for longer periods of time as compared to peers. I assume that these upwardly mobile successful women had observed or learned about others who had taken a similar path. I believe they had witnessed individuals who received rewards or positive reinforcements and therefore, they came to believe that because the results had been positive for others, the outcome could be the same for them.

The experience of poverty, particularly for women, is a life-changing event. As a result, women may find themselves adopting a variety of different beliefs – some may accept defeat, essentially feeling hopeless and helpless by their life circumstances, while others become social advocates, questioning the system and yearning for upward mobility because they notice a difference in themselves (compared to other lower-class women) (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). Although the women who participated in this study had

differing ideas about success, none of the women indicated they felt completely hopeless or helpless by their life circumstances. As a matter of fact, the women who seemed to be in the midst of experiencing financial hardship appeared even more determined to make changes, as evidenced by having a positive outlook or sharing her plans to “make life better.”

Bandura (1977) provided the concept of self-efficacy, particularly describing it as an individual’s tendency to remain intrinsically motivated in the face of adversity. Perhaps these ideas cannot be conceptualized in an all-or-none manner as is typically the case, especially when considering individuals who are in the process of making drastic identity shifts. For instance, the women in this study seemed to experience a moment when “everything clicked” and this epiphany served as a catalyst to enable the women to continue moving forward. Therefore, perhaps the concept of self-efficacy as it relates to this study is more reflective of the women’s ability to gain awareness of their (once hidden) potential and of the overall possibilities. With that, the amount of self-efficacy one possesses is crucial in continuing in their process of change.

According to the literature, the majority of individuals do not experience dramatic change in social class status; however, according to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), many Americans will undergo significant shifts in economic prosperity (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). Negotiating the changes that occur as a result of these shifts in social class and economic prosperity could have lasting psychological implications, as one adapts to his or her adjustments in identity. For example, the realization that one is unrecognizable to oneself (as well as to her family and friends) may be one of the most difficult tasks to work through. Many women in this study spoke about the difficulties they experienced as a result of leaving their former lives of poverty behind. Specifically, they commented on friends (and sometimes family) who became unsupportive once they began to distance themselves from a lower social class in search of a more prosperous life. As a helping professional, it is essential that we remain cognizant of the “costs” of change and we pass this information along to those we help. For example, one who has not experienced a transition from all that is familiar (i.e., social supports) may not understand the significant shift accompanied by loneliness and isolation. Thus, as a helping professional, it is our responsibility to prepare those we help with this knowledge.

Upward mobility is the process of leaving ones’ social class of origin behind in order to move (upward) to a more socially advantageous position. The concept of upward mobility is not a new phenomenon. Baxter (1994) noted that individuals, especially women, *marry up* in order to boost social standing. On a much larger scale, low-income individuals often feel extremely pressured to justify and explain their class positions. In response, they become upwardly mobile, aspiring for more socially acceptable middle-class lives (Bullock & Limbert, 2003; Jones, 2003).

According to Bullock and Limbert (2003), aside from marriage, education is one of the most common ways to achieve upward mobility. Bettie (2002) discovered that beginning as early as high school, teenage girls recognized the importance of higher education, particularly if an older sister had attended college. Older sisters seemed to play a crucial role by providing important information about the college experience (Bettie, 2002). For women who had become upwardly mobile, they noted obtaining an education

had given them valuable skills and qualifications that protected their middle-class standings (Lawler, 1999).

Four-year degree programs are often inaccessible to many low-income women, particularly welfare recipients. Although college enhances a woman's social standing as well as her psychological well-being, low-income women often expressed uncertainty about beginning and finishing a baccalaureate degree program (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). Two of the women who participated in this study stated that they preferred to attend a smaller, community college (versus a state university) because the university was "too big" with too many students. In addition, the majority of the women interviewed explained that they planned to pursue a degree in the nursing field. One wonders if they viewed nursing as a "fast way" to make money. Indeed, it is a known fact that the nursing field is not only a quick route to make significant financial gains, but it is also a secure manner of ensuring prosperity. With that, many are well aware of the availability and security that a nursing career can provide.

For many women who escaped lives of poverty, the outstanding difference was the presence and support of a third party, namely a mental health provider. For instance, Dodson (1998) discovered that although counseling was mandatory in some circumstances, the majority of women who participated in therapy were doing so voluntarily. The women who received mental health services noted the help was beneficial, even if it was initially difficult to share personal information with a stranger. For many low-income individuals, mental health services are often hard to come by; therefore, it is not unusual for a woman who has suffered a loss, been abused, or traumatized to have never participated in any type of individual counseling (Dodson, 1998). Only one woman in this study explicitly stated she would recommend other women pursue mental health counseling; she also commented, "many women didn't think they needed counseling." Two women spoke about the positive benefits of counseling, namely because it provided a safe place to "vent." Many others, however, indicated that they had participated in counseling as a child or adolescent and it had not been helpful at all, particularly when counseling occurred in conjunction with taking medication. However, when asked what a mental health provider could offer, the women provided a resounding response that no matter the situation or circumstances, they had to be "ready" to change or seek help and there was "nothing *anyone*" could do until they were ready to make changes. With that, many believed that a counselor could provide a safe place of support where she could be heard.

The presence of children often made the most significant difference in motivating women to return to school, begin job-training programs, volunteer, or even venture out into the world (Dodson, 1998). Mothers reported that they felt an obligation, as well as a desire, to make life easier and better for their children. At the same time, they stated leaving their children to pursue work or educational pursuits was especially difficult, as they felt conflicted by the right course of action to take (Dodson, 1998). All ten women in this study were mothers and the one unifying trait that they had in common was the fact that they all stated they wanted their children's lives to be "better" than their own. Many women spoke about how they disliked school, yet they viewed an education as being the "only way" to adequately provide for their children.

### Considerations and Limitations

Many regard being poor or working-class as pathological. As a result of the stigma and shame, many try to *pass*, or act as though they are from a more socially prominent background. For many, having someone learn the truth about their social class background is more damaging than being poor or working-class. As I conducted these interviews, I sometimes wondered if the women were trying to present themselves in a more favorable light to avoid being judged. One woman spoke about the fact she was “driving the crappy car” on the day of our interview and her husband was driving her “SUV.” One woman spoke about going to the mall to purchase her son’s clothes and “not having to get his toys from the Goodwill.” I found myself wanting the women to trust me and feel safe in providing honest information. However, I often wondered about my results and the potential differences in findings if I had had more time to spend with each woman.

I am aware I had (and still have) preconceived ideas about resiliency, overcoming adverse situations, and success, especially as these beliefs relate to poverty. Although my experiences have led me to equate success with academia and future career advancement, this was not the case with the women who participated in this study. I found women who lived in government housing and were proud their children had a clean place to sleep. Although some of the women were working toward college degrees, many were terrified of this process because they felt “so far behind” their peers and most had no conceptualization of a college experience. I feel I learned a great deal about myself throughout this research project, for I began to look at my own experiences a bit closer. In the outset of this study, I struggled with defining success, but as the study came to an end I realized my research was about transitions, and the process of change, much more so than the end result of “success” I imagined finding.

### Conclusion and Implications for Practice

When I began this study I was interested in learning how the women had overcome lives of poverty. I anticipated the women would speak about how they encountered this obstacle in a lock step approach and had obtained prestigious careers which were indicative of being “successful.” However, it soon became apparent that the overarching themes of this study were related to the process of making life-altering changes. The women had varying reasons for identifying as successful, many of which were unrelated to academia or career attainment. All of the women agreed that the changes that came about in their lives were a result of becoming pregnant and moreover, that their children had been a guiding force in motivating them to change, as they wanted their children’s lives to be “better” than their own.

I believe having the opportunity to conduct this study was one of the most rewarding experiences I have known. In the beginning, I assumed as I interviewed the women, they would provide suggestions for how a helping professional could be beneficial. I believed I would walk away knowing specific techniques I could implement in working with diverse women who were struggling to significantly change their lives. However, one of the most important things I learned was in many instances, the women needed a good listener, an objective voice, and a safe place to express their feelings.

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